

NSS, State Dept. reviews completed

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July 23, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR: DR. KISSINGER

MORI C05099497

FROM: JOHN H. HOLDRIDGE

SUBJECT: Status Report on the South Vietnamese  
Presidential Campaign

With the August 4 deadline for the filing of presidential candidates now less than two weeks away, a war of nerves prevails among the three major contenders. Specifically at issue is whether Ky will be able to meet the nomination requirements -- endorsements by 40 Assemblymen or 100 Provincial and Municipal Councilmen. President Thieu appears intent upon denying Ky's candidacy, and he has the influence to accomplish this. General Minh, meanwhile, has strongly implied that he will not file if Ky fails to qualify. If these conditions hold through the filing deadline, President Thieu will either face Minh in a two man race, or will have no credible competition at all.

Vice President Ky. Ky's position is quite simple; he intends to be a candidate and is attempting to gain the necessary 100 endorsements from Provincial and Municipal Councilmen. However, it has been apparent for some time that Ky would be unable to do so on his own. Consequently, General Minh has agreed to use his influence in the provinces on Ky's behalf while he gathers signatures in the National Assembly necessary for his own candidacy. Even so, Ky is in trouble; on July 22, a member of Ky's staff reported that 102 endorsements had been gathered for Ky, but that only 30 have been certified by Province Chiefs. Ky continues to maintain publicly that he will qualify, but he may be basing this partly on pride and partly on the hope that the U.S. will intercede with Thieu at the last moment.

President Thieu. Thieu would clearly prefer to face General Minh in a two man race. He is confident that he could win such a contest in a reasonably fair fashion. He would also like to emerge with an absolute majority; he has been bothered by charges that he has been a "minority

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president" for the last four years. Ky's candidacy ;would complicate things for Thieu. He might not be able to achieve a clear majority in a three-man race without resorting to fairly visible pressure tactics. At the same time, Thieu's dislike for Ky has undoubtedly increased in the past several weeks as a result of Ky's inflammatory public charges, and Thieu would probably not mind humiliating Ky in Vietnamese eyes by forcing him out of the race.

that Thieu's supporters are using all of their influence to obtain the maximum number of endorsements for Thieu. At last report, 92 of the 93 Provincial and Municipal Councilmen in MR III had opted for Thieu.

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Ambassador Bunker spoke to Thieu on July 16 about rumors of pressure tactics in the provinces as well as of a general effort to Thwart Ky. Thieu denied the charges. But he criticized Ky bitterly, and was somewhat evasive in outlining the actual situation in the provinces. Thieu also wondered aloud how long Minh would keep trying to blackmail him by threatening not to run if Ky did not qualify.

Duong Van Minh. General Minh is unquestionably using his threat to withdraw as pressure on Thieu, since it is widely agreed that Ky's presence in the race would benefit Minh. Thus his threat cannot be taken at face value.

Even so, there is a good deal of uncertainty about Minh's real intentions. He has the necessary endorsements, an embryonic staff, and a few speeches to his credit, but little else. An Quang Buddhist leaders are lukewarm to his candidacy; his retired army colleagues have not yet endorsed him publicly; Tran Van Don has deserted him for Thieu; and one of the few independent political groups with organized strength in the delta is ready to support Thieu. At this point, Minh may not only be convinced that he stands no chance of winning, but he may be deeply concerned about his ability to make even a reasonably good showing in a two man race. Thus it is quite possible that he will decide that Ky's failure to qualify affords him the best opportunity to bow out.

The outlook. Ky's failure to make the race would generate a good deal of adverse publicity. ("Any election in which the Vice President is unable to qualify must be unfair.") As long as Minh remained in the race, however, it would be difficult to substantiate the more damaging charge that the Vietnamese were being denied fair choice in the election. In our view, therefore, the most important consideration is to keep Minh in the race.

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Our position. Pressing Thieu to allow Ky's candidacy would not necessarily accomplish this. Minh has stated that he will bow out of the race at any time he feels Thieu's tactics have become overly oppressive. In one respect at least, Ky's candidacy would actually make it easier for Minh to withdraw later in the campaign if he chose to do so. And President Thieu would be extremely annoyed if we forced him to allow Ky to run.

One possible solution is a gentlemen's arrangement between Thieu and Minh. Thieu could assure Minh of an honest chance to win, and would also guarantee him at least 40 per cent of the vote. This promise should remove Minh's fear of being humiliated. Thieu could offer any combination of other inducements to assure Minh's candidacy. We could offer to act as an honest broker, although we would not want to monitor the GVN during the campaign as Minh has requested us to do. (Ambassador Habib has suggested that we consider an arrangement along these lines.)

There is still some time left for further developments (i. e., Thieu might relent and decide on his own to allow Ky's candidacy). In any event, it might be wise to obtain a further reading on the situation from Ambassador Bunker about a week before the deadline. We shall draft a cable to him if he has not forwarded a report by then.

#### RECOMMENDATION:

That you authorize us to prepare a cable to Ambassador Bunker asking him again to urge Thieu to give his opponents a fair chance.

Approve \_\_\_\_\_ Disapprove \_\_\_\_\_

*"Gon, check with Win who has  
already drafted a cable this subject."*

*(Dave Halperin)*

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